



THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

A COMMUNION OF CHURCHES – EINE KIRCHENGEMEINSCHAFT – UNA COMUNIÓN DE IGLESIAS – UNE COMMUNION D'ÉGLISES

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An LWF Climate Change Encounter in India

“Climate change” refers to the human-caused disruption of the global climate and weather system, due especially to the emission of greenhouse gases. In 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), comprising hundreds of scientists from around the world, concluded unequivocally that climate change is occurring: the probability of this change being due to natural processes is less than five percent, and due to greenhouse gases, over ninety percent. Greenhouse gases trap the solar radiation entering the atmosphere, thus causing an unnatural warming of the atmosphere, land surfaces and oceans. This has especially accelerated in the last fifty years due to industrialization and an increase in the use of fossil fuel. Today, levels of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, are considerable higher than at any time in at least the past 650,000 years: This contributes directly to the rise in global temperatures, changing storm patterns and rising sea levels. An increase of two degrees in global temperatures would mean that each year up to ten million people would be affected by coastal flooding. Without serious redress of this situation now, the increase is likely to be far more (data from Christian Aid, “The Science and the Impacts”).

From 16-20 April 2009, around twenty-four persons from India and other parts of the world met in the coastal community of Puri, in Orissa state, India, to witness firsthand and better to understand dramatic examples of climate change in that area, and to reflect on how this relates to what is occurring in other parts of the world. This event was organized by the Department for Theology and Studies of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), as part of the overall LWF strategy related to climate change, and in cooperation with the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of India (UELCI) and Lutheran World Service India (LWSI).

Participants came from LWF member churches in India, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Australia, Indonesia and the USA, from LWF-related World Service programs in India, Bangladesh and Tanzania, as well as other Christian denominations and other faiths. They included pastors, theologians, biblical scholars, ethicists, communicators, anthropologists, church staff, advocates, students and specialists working on adaptation and mitigation measures related to climate change.

Those from outside India first went to Calcutta, an intense sprawling metropolis to which millions of people have migrated from other places, such that today, only thirty-seven percent speak the local language, Bengali. Calcutta is becoming a center for many “climate refugees,” who



migrate there from areas especially impacted by climate change. Through the Urban Development Program of LWSI, participants encountered and spoke with those living in a settled community along a railroad track behind a massive garbage dump, and in another community beneath a railroad track embankment. In both cases, residents expressed how they are being empowered to take responsibility for their communities and lives.

During our time together in Puri, we analyzed the causes and effects of climate change around the world, reflected from biblical and other faith perspectives, and spent two very hot days of exposure visits to rural coastal communities dramatically affected by climate change. These were communities in which the Rural Development Project of LWSI is working to educate, empower people and support local initiatives (self-help groups, disaster management and village development committees) in the face of these changes.

A number of the participants and most living in the villages were indigenous peoples (Dalit, tribal/Adivasis). Creative worship was led by recent graduates of Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, with indigenous music, symbols and stories underlining the spiritual meaning and significance of what we saw and heard during the visits.

In the six rural communities we visited, we were warmly welcomed by the hundreds of people residing in these villages with indigenous songs, rituals and flowers. We heard testimony from and dialogued and interacted with a large number of persons, whose entire lives, meaning and future are deeply affected by climate change. They intimately know its realities and causes and were eager to share their knowledge and experiences with us.

The people we met invited us to witness and to be witnesses for and with them, which is the purpose of the following communiqué. They yearn to make global connections and experience solidarity with others in what they have experienced and in the hopeful actions they are taking for their future. The following communiqué conveys what we witnessed.



*Asha:*¹ Witnessing to Hope Amid Rising Waters

In many parts of the world, climate change remains something “out there” in the future, but for these villagers it is no longer “out there.” With every surge of the insatiable sea, climate change becomes all the more local, to the extent that one day their village will be “in there,” swallowed by the waters. Here the disturbing effects of climate change are not just predicted to occur in the future, but are undeniably present today.

Climate change scientists may be among today’s prophets, but the people and land in these communities bear vivid testimony to the actual pain and displacement involved. Whole villages have been destroyed by the sea. More frequent and extended periods of rain, along with more intense storms, flood their land and homes far more often than in the past. People here live with this ever-present reality, which haunts their memories, motivates what they are doing in the present and shapes their hopes for the future.

What we saw and experienced

As we looked out at the rising waters of the Bay of Bengal, and heard the waves pounding onto the shore each morning, we saw large expanses of seawater and shrinking sandbars, covering large areas where a few years ago, hundreds of houses had stood, along with land for growing crops. The sea is coming much closer than it has been before, whether gradually or through sudden cyclones: fifteen years ago, people went out twenty kilometers to the sea, but now it is only half a kilometer away and coming closer every day.

We stood on the shore and looked out to the sea of the Bay of Bengal. Beside us on the beach were the shells of large turtles whose habitat had been destroyed. A few hundred yards out to sea was a sandbar shining golden in the sun, which we were told would be submerged in another two months. Only a few years ago that shining sandbar was a lively fishing village. Now there is nothing--no houses, no animals, no trees. The village had been swallowed by the sea. Like several other villages along the coast of Orissa on the Bay of Bengal, the sea had inundated the coastline and swallowed all before it. Fifteen years ago, said one fisherman, the shoreline was five kilometers away. Now it was only a few hundred meters away.

Nearby, casuarina trees, provided through LWSI, are helping to hold back the further encroachment of the sea into the land, as well as protecting the Hindu temple that has replaced the previous temple that disappeared into the sea.



¹ The word for “hope” in several Indian languages.

What we heard

The state of Orissa is the poorest of the eleven major Indian states; nearly half of the rural population lives below the poverty line. The state has the highest infant mortality rate and fifty percent of the malaria-related deaths in India. Tropical storms that form over the Bay of Bengal have made this one of the most disaster prone areas of the world. We heard and experienced how Orissa is reeling under climatic chaos ranging from heat waves to cyclones, from droughts to floods. In the last four years alone, such calamities have claimed more than 30,000 lives.

People's lives and identities are deeply connected with the land and the water. For their livelihood, they fish the waters and farm the land. Their intrinsic connection with the land and the water is being impacted dramatically: climate change is contributing significantly to there being too much water, with the strong winds (or cyclones) increasingly flooding the land, destroying life and livelihoods. Their water for drinking and irrigation becomes salty from the invading sea, or polluted because of the lack of adequate sewage. Further inland, periods of too little water (drought) are the problem. When asked why all of this is occurring, even the young children could readily describe why the climate is changing.

We felt firsthand the pattern of excessive, rising and moist heat that is seriously impacting health and life conditions for human beings, animals and plants. Villagers reported dramatic rises in waterborne diseases such as sunstroke, skin diseases, malaria, dengue, hepatitis B, arthritis, etc. Plants and fish are smaller and more susceptible to disease.

Furthermore,

- Farming, fishing and drinking water has become polluted and salinized: "What was life-giving water now is killing us."
- The seasons are changing--rains come later and heavier, and the summer heat is longer and more intense.
- Residents spoke of land around them that used to be covered with jungles, providing habitat for tigers, but on which only a few protected trees now stand.
- A river that used to flood every five to seven years now does so every year, wiping out the crops on which they depend for their livelihood. The people conveyed a calm sense of inevitability, "the water will come and wash everything away again."
- When asked to reflect on what they had experienced, they replied, "The pain has rooted in our hearts—every day we live with the pain. It has become part of our lives."
- "Fifteen years from now this village will not exist. But why would we move? This is where our life and livelihood are." A young man admitted that he might have a better life in the city, "but what then will happen to this community?" Again and again, the refrain was heard, "We will not leave the land!"

When a super cyclone hit the coastal village of Natara, the storm winds ripped the roofs from the houses. The farm animals fled and drowned in the sea. Amid the mayhem, one house with a metal roof remained standing. The people of the village huddled in this house and made a joint decision: "We will not flee. If we live, we will live together. If we die, we will die together." For five days they survived under that roof—no food except for a few fallen coconuts that provided some sustenance for the children. When the storm subsided, they gathered what food they had and continued to eat their meals in common. "The cyclone has brought us together as a

community.” Among other measures, they are now building a dyke to keep the encroaching water out of their village.

The locals have no doubt that the rising sea levels are due to climate change. The devastation of their village is evidence they cannot ignore. We have heard about the probability that islands in the Pacific, for example, will one day be inundated by rising seas. But, for the villagers on the Orissa coast that day has come.



Yet we were encouraged

The strong bonds of care and communal sharing in these Hindu and tribal villages are reminiscent of the early Christian communities in which they shared all things (Acts 2: 44-45), as well as the story of the feeding of the multitude (Mt 14: 13-21): through sharing, there was bread and fish for all. Might communities such as these in India inspire all of us to do more of this today? People are yearning for different ways of living that will not make them so sick.

Climate change is dramatically affecting the physical environments of these fishing and farming villages. Changes in the natural environment caused, for example, by climate change, deforestation, and pollution not only affect the ecosystem and economy, but also indigenous ways of life. People spoke about the current changes from practical but also spiritual perspectives—these are deeply intertwined.

For the people in these villages, religious beliefs and practices are intimately connected to the natural domain. The elements of nature, such as the sea, trees, land and animals are thought of as divine beings. They are revered in everyday practice and celebration. Trees set aside in the community are shrines for deities.

Among other factors, it was through these spiritual perspectives that people interpreted their experiences of natural disasters and furthered social, economic, psychological and ecological processes of adaptation and restoration. Although they sensed that the gods might be punishing them because of what they have done to nature, they view themselves as responsible for setting things right again. Strong bodied fishermen cast their nets into the sea of their livelihood, with the hope that the goddess of the sea will not destroy again.

Based on these observations, we recommend that projects and initiatives for relief, development and empowerment be sensitive to and include local spiritualities and ways of life through which people relate to nature and to each other. Attention to this is crucial if responses to climate change are to be effective and sustainable.

We were continually amazed by the enduring hope of the people, and their resolve and commitment to act, adapt to and change the situations they face:

- Their trust in their gods to protect and guide them: “We believe that our village will disappear in the next ten years, but we also believe that the gods will take care of us.”
- In observing one religious festival, for three days the land is not touched, but is “treated like a woman undergoing menstruation.” During other festivals also, earth is given rest. There are connections here with the Sabbath traditions in the Bible.

Their initiatives to adapt and take preventative measures by:

- Continually planting more trees
- Educating the children
- Promoting traditional food, well-being and health
- Relying more on joint family systems (rather than small nuclear families), which are able to survive better amid climate change
- Building houses on safer ground, or raising them off the ground
- Building elevated tubal wells that keep the water from becoming salty in times of floods
- Cooperating with government efforts and various disaster alert mechanisms and groups
- Receiving new seeds to plant after floods.



In the aftermath of the big storms and floods, the women can now go out from their homes, in ways they could not before. Time and again, it was apparent that the women had been empowered and were organizing, for example, to plant trees and protect the forests: "For us, trees are life, so we will continue planting more: three trees for every child." They also are developing their own self-help and income-generating activities, which gives the women new self-confidence, and inspires the men to do likewise. We heard of how it was the women who appealed to and successfully lobbied the government to get the fresh water they require.

We saw and heard how communities are adapting to life-giving forces from nature and pursuing mitigation, using appropriate technologies or systems:

- Adapting crops to make them saline tolerant
- Introducing prawn farming (although this can also pollute the water supply)
- Organizing local people to own and manage their own environment: rights-based access to water, land and forests
- Harvesting rainwater for irrigation and other purposes
- Constructing houses using stones instead of bricks to keep temperatures lower

- Establishing village grain banks of a few bags of rice from which people can draw in their time of need and replace as they are able.

Participants from other parts of the world were able to compare and share their experiences and insights from living and working in other areas vulnerable to climate change. The Arctic area of Canada, where the Inuit peoples live, serves as a global “air conditioner” for tropical areas, but the ice there is melting dramatically. Many low-lying communities of Denmark are likely to be flooded in the future. In Tanzania, climate change is becoming as urgent an issue as are HIV and AIDS. It is connected with other patterns of injustice: older women (stigmatized as “witches”), were blamed and killed for the death of children who in fact were dying from waterborne diseases escalated by climate change. Now, with cleaner water available, the children are healthier, and the old women no longer suspect. In Bangladesh, a new kind of rice is being used to adapt to the later, crop-destroying monsoon season. Bush fires, which recently ravaged parts of Australia, provoke reflections on where was God in all of this? Not only is earth suffering all around the world, but also our interconnections are becoming more apparent.

Our Call

Thus, to the rest of the Lutheran communion, we issue a call to confession and action. To be in communion with creation, means to be in solidarity with those victimized by climate change, who inspire and motivate our commitment and actions to redress climate change.

For Christians, God and creation are distinct, yet on biblical bases, God could be imaged as lamenting or weeping on behalf of what is occurring under climate change. By disturbing the known balance of nature with the impact of climate change, have we disturbed the wisdom of God, the blueprint that orders and integrates the web of creation (see Job 28 and Prov 8)? By mutilating the face of the planet with climate change disasters, are we desecrating the sanctuary of the presence of God who fills the earth and continues to create in, with and under this cosmos (see Isa 6:3 and Ps 104)? By polluting the atmosphere with excessive greenhouse gases, are we polluting the very breath of God that animates and rejuvenates us and our planet home (see Gen 1:2, 2:7)? By causing adverse climate changes, we have wounded earth and created a condition that has increased the cries of creation, the pain of the poor and the sufferings of God.

To cut back significantly on the carbon emissions that contribute so severely to climate change, massive changes in policy, practices and lifestyle will need to be made, especially by those in the more affluent areas of the world. The villagers were well aware of how industrialization has contributed to climate change. But, what was striking were the strong awareness and intentional actions being taken by the people in these severely affected communities to change *their* practices in order to adapt to and to mitigate climate change disasters. Their empowerment to take responsibility for their lives, land and future is a strong witness to those who contribute disproportionately to the problem, and often feel unable to make changes. For example, large timber companies in the world continue to cut huge numbers of trees, but the women cooking in these villages are burning dried leaves and cow dung in order to avoid cutting down one more tree.

The purpose of this encounter was to “bear witness” to what is occurring in an especially vulnerable area of the world. The above witness is what we want to bring to the wider Lutheran communion, as well as ecumenical and civil society partners. Our recommendation is that the learnings and insights from this process might be expanded and further pursued prior to and at the Pre-Assemblies leading up to the 2010 LWF Assembly in Stuttgart. For example, for a brief period prior to the Pre-Assemblies, a small delegation might visit an area especially affected by climate change, and bring that witness to the Pre-Assembly, as part of a cumulative process moving toward the 2010 Assembly.

In addition, we support and encourage the various advocacy positions related to climate change that the LWF Council and member churches have already taken, encourage others to do likewise, and urge that there be a strategic presence and message of the LWF at the December 2009 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen, Denmark. To coincide with that crucial meeting, we propose that a time be designated and promoted globally for ringing church (and other) bells in order to emphasize the urgency of redressing climate change.

May God, the mother of the village well and the village women, help you draw water for life and laughter. May God, the father of the outcaste poor and deserted Dalits, meet you waiting in their streets and teach you hope. May Jesus, a son to malnourished mothers and a brother to unwanted daughters, teach you to be a midwife who brings new life from the risen one. May the Spirit, who seeks justice for earth oppressed by the ways of the past, lead you to open new eyes to see the path beyond evil to freedom. Amen.

(Blessing at the conclusion of the Eucharist at Puri.)



Participants included: Arul Aram, B.N. Biswal, Karen Bloomquist, Sagarika Chetty, Norman Habel, Keld Balmer Hansen, Anupama Hial, Anam Chandra Khosla, Bonar Lumbantobing, Chandran Paul Martin, Peter Matthews, Kishore Kumar Nag, Belinda Praisys, M.G. Neogi, Sofia Orelan, Barbara Rossing, Peniel Rufus, Richard Sarker, Emmanuel Shangweli, Anja Stuckenberger, Gnana Theophilus, Wesley Vinod, Annie Watson.